

Taiji Inamasu

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Taiji Inamasu (TI)

Kahului, Maui

April 21, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: This is an interview with Taiji Inamasu, spelled T-A-I-J-I I-N-A-M-A-S-U at the Kahului Union Church and that's in Kahului, Maui, Hawai'i. The date is Tuesday, April 21, 1998 and the interviewer is Jeanne Johnston.

Okay, Mr. Inamasu, can you tell me where you were born and what your birth date is?

TI: I was born in Ha'ikū, Maui and I'm eighty-five years old, born in January 15, 1913.

JJ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

TI: Actually, I had two sisters and seven brothers but three of my brothers are gone so now I have five brothers and two sisters.

JJ: Where were you in the family? Which child were you?

TI: I was the second child.

JJ: And you had one older brother?

TI: I have one older brother.

JJ: Okay. Tell me about your mother.

TI: Oh, my mother was born in—I think was Hāna or Kīpahulu, I'm not sure. I guess she went to grammar school so she could talk English fluently. While I didn't ask too much about her life, but that's the thing that I can remember.

JJ: What was your mother's name?

TI: My mother's name was Tsuruyo Hamazawa, her maiden name.

JJ: Where were her parents from?

TI: Her parents were from (Japan and settled in) Hāna, I think.

- JJ: What language did they speak at home?
- TI: I guess they spoke Japanese and of course, I think I heard my grandfather speaking Hawaiian. So those days, I think they had more Hawaiians than Japanese in Hāna or Kīpahulu. Either one.
- JJ: And then a little about your father's family?
- TI: Oh, my father, I think he came from Japan because he doesn't say much about his Japan life. But I think he was more quiet man and I guess he used to, what do you call it? What do you call that? Community helper, I guess.
- JJ: Was that in Hāna or in Ha'ikū?
- TI: No, that's in Peahi.
- JJ: Oh, Peahi. How far is Peahi from Ha'ikū?
- TI: That's about four to five miles away.
- JJ: So you were born in Ha'ikū and how long did you live in Ha'ikū?
- TI: I think for about four years.
- JJ: Do you remember what it was like in Ha'ikū in those days?
- TI: Well, I can hardly remember those things. But they had a camp. That camp I remember. It's just below what today is known as the Fourth Division. The big camp they had there.
- JJ: How old were you when you moved to Peahi?
- TI: I'm not sure, but about four years, three to four years I guess.
- JJ: So what do you remember about Peahi in those days?
- TI: Well, from there, I was raised until I graduated from the grammar school. So that's about, maybe roughly about, ten years.
- JJ: Did you live in a plantation house down there?
- TI: Yes, we lived in a plantation house.
- JJ: What did the house look like?
- TI: Oh, it's a wooden house and it's of course, compared to today's, a real shack. (Chuckles)
- JJ: How big was it?
- TI: About three bedroom.
- JJ: And the community, how large was the—how many houses were there then?

- TI: Oh, I think there were over a hundred, I guess or more because there's some other camp nearby and those camps were—they had about twenty to thirty houses.
- JJ: Was that near the beach?
- TI: No, it's far away from the beach roughly about four miles, three to four miles, I think.
- JJ: What did you kids do for play and for fun?
- TI: We used to go swimming. Then we used to go to the grammar school. We used to have that sports, like basketball or softball or something so we used to play there. And then we used to go fishing. Sometimes we used to help our parents do some small jobs around the house.
- JJ: And which school did you go to there?
- TI: It was named Halehaku School. It has about one, two, about eight classrooms. It had (a hill) right back of the school, I think they had teachers' cottage, two teachers' cottage. That's where the teachers used to live. Of course, we used to have a school garden and there when we had sitting time, we used to work there.
- JJ: And then after that, you went to high school where?
- TI: After graduating from the grammar school, I went to Lahainaluna [School] and those days, they used to call that Lahaina Technical High School in Lahaina.
- JJ: How old were you then?
- TI: Oh, I think I was almost eighteen maybe. I'm not sure. Seventeen or eighteen, someplace around there.
- JJ: What was it like there? Where did you live?
- TI: That Lahainaluna High School, it's a boarding school so I used to be a boarder there. And I stayed there four years. When I graduated from the school, I feel just like I was a man already, that I could serve in any community because the life that they used to teach down there is just like when you work out. . . .
- JJ: Can you tell me a little about what the classes were like and what they taught you?
- TI: I took up auto repairing. And then this boarding school, they teach you to be a just like an individual and you must learn how to live, just like. So in the morning, you work one hour, then you have a class up till 2:30. Then from 2:30 on, you used to work two hours more. And [in] one day, all together, it's three hours that used to work. So when it come to working, you know what is work. At the same time, you come just like independent person already. You know what life going be. So I'm glad that I went that school.
- JJ: What did you do after you graduated?
- TI: After I graduated, I worked in the field little while, and they had one opening to be a tractor repair mechanic. So I applied for that and I got the job. And I work there for couple of years. Then the whole shop, everything, close up because the cannery or the Ha'ikū pineapple [Ha'ikū Fruit

Packing Company] was sold to Hawaiian Pine[apple Company] and Hawaiian Pine just closed everything up.

JJ: Where were you living at that time?

TI: I was living Peahi that time, I think. Then I moved to Spreckelsville. Camp 2, they called that.

JJ: What was that like? What did it look like at Spreckelsville?

TI: Well, Spreckelsville, that was a cane field, surrounded by cane. But I survived so it's okay.

JJ: How did the houses look?

TI: It's not the, well, nice-looking houses too. But it was all right. I think that houses—two- to three-bedroom houses I think.

JJ: Were they plantation-type houses?

TI: They were all plantation-type houses. And then when you living this kind camps like that, you just like one community and live like brothers and sisters, everything you help each other and everything. That was good life.

JJ: How many people were there in that community?

TI: Let's see. Maybe over fifty families. So when you come down to it, over 200 people, children and all.

JJ: What did the people do for recreation in those days?

TI: Some used to go to the beach, some used to go—they used to go to that (pause) sports and some used to just sit down.

JJ: So it was a good life during those days?

TI: Those days, good life. You get nothing to worry, you get everything right there.

JJ: Was there a store in your little community too? Did they have a grocery store there or did you have to go away to buy your food?

TI: We had one store, right in there, so many camps. Then they had one store there so buying things it was pretty easy. Post office everything.

JJ: Then where did you go? You worked there as an auto mechanic there, is that right?

TI: No, when I moved to Camp 2, I worked about one year in a service station, then apply for electrical. For HC&S [Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar] Company, electrical department and I got the job.

JJ: Where did you live then?

TI: Then the time has come that every occupant in that camp has to move out because the camp was

going be demolished. So I moved to Kahului, and till today, I'm there yet. I have my own home and everything.

JJ: When did you get married?

TI: I think I got married in nineteen . . .

JJ: In 1947?

TI: I think 1947.

JJ: Where were you when you got married? Where were you living at that time?

TI: That time, I was still living in Camp 2, in Spreckelsville.

JJ: Is that where you met your wife?

TI: Well, I think she was from Pu'unēnē and I was Spreckelsville and that's where we met.

JJ: What is your wife's name?

TI: Yoshie.

JJ: And her maiden name?

TI: Yoshie Doi.

JJ: So she was living in Pu'unēnē at that time, and where was it that you got married?

TI: I got married in Pu'unēnē, they had a church there and then while—her Japanese church, Hongwanji church, so I got married in there. Then we lived in Spreckelsville until, I'm not sure, but I think about fourteen years. Then we moved out.

JJ: Did you have any children?

TI: That's when I had two girls with me.

JJ: And then you moved to Kahului?

TI: I moved to Kahului (in 1961).

JJ: How long did you work for the electric company?

TI: I worked for this HC&S company for about forty-four years until I finally retired at the age of sixty-five.

JJ: What were your hobbies?

TI: Oh, my hobbies. I used to raise orchids and I used to raise vegetables. Then most time, I used to spend my life fishing.

- JJ: Where did you go fishing?
- TI: I went down Kīhei, right down this Kahului, that breakwater, pier, and down Waihe'e. And sometimes way up that Camp 1.
- JJ: What kind of fish did you catch?
- TI: Oh, all kind of fish. We used to catch *akule*. I don't know what that name but *akule*. We used to hook down the pier. Ooh, those days, they had plenty *akules* there. And I used to go there every afternoon sometimes. Then we used to catch—what they call that *pāpio*. Sometimes *moi*. Sometimes we used to hook, what do they call it? (*Āhole*.)
- JJ: Oh, tilapia?
- TI: Tilapia. No, I don't know it's a new imported fish. What do you call that? Is there—they call that small baby fish. '*Oama*, I think, the small one. We used to hook that. Oh, that tastes pretty good. Hook that and then you make a deep fry and oh, it's a good beer chaser and everything. So I used to hook so much. Then we used to give to some of my friends or my son-in-laws, and they used to enjoy eating it.
- JJ: So where were you living on April 1, 1946?
- TI: That time, I was still in Spreckelsville.
- JJ: In the camp there?
- TI: Mm hmm [yes], Camp 2.
- JJ: Can you describe what it looked like there, in Spreckelsville at that time, before the tidal wave?
- TI: Before the tidal wave? It's along the beach, all the beach area, Spreckelsville beach area. Mostly Caucasians used to live, mostly. And then everything—well it was private land. Private home, I guess. So I'm not sure what the situation there was but certain area, you could go fishing but certain area you cannot. They tell, "No, no, don't come around here." That's—but the homes, they all located right around the shoreline. Right near the shoreline.
- JJ: How many homes were there along the shore?
- TI: See, I don't know. Maybe thirty to forty houses I guess. I'm not sure.
- JJ: What was—do you know what the family life was like around there? Did everybody work for the plantation in those days?
- TI: Most of the people were working for the plantation.
- JJ: Can you tell me if there was any military activity around?
- TI: Mm hmm, there was. Right in that area, they have that—those days they used to call that—that was the Kahului Naval Air [Station]. And that extends right up to that shoreline. They had all that fence so that nobody can go in there.

JJ: What was inside the fence?

TI: Inside the fence, there was just plain. Some were dunes, sand dunes, and *kiawe* trees and all kind bushes. But they had runway located in there because it was a naval base, air base. They had a big runway. So they put a fence there so people keep out.

JJ: And that was right next to Spreckelsville?

TI: Yeah, it was right located in Spreckelsville, right through.

JJ: So tell me what happened that morning from when you first woke up that morning.

TI: We had sent down to the Spreckelsville area, right down the beach to chop some branches, to clear our electrical wire. Then something unusual happened that I didn't even realize that was a tidal wave. While cutting trees, I saw the beach area right near the shoreline. The water was dirty, just like mud. All around the beach area was dirty. Then I asked my co-worker, "Why is the beach so dirty?"

He said, "Oh, maybe they throwing some dirty water in the beach."

I said, "Oh, that's all right but looks kind of funny."

In the meantime, some fisherman went out. But they came back. When they came back, oh they're back. Then that small wave came right in and it climbed. Ordinary wave will not climb there but this small wave came up and just climb right up. "Hey, something wrong here. How can a wave come over way up here?"

Then I—"Hey, something wrong with that beach. Let's take a look."

We turned around and just—then we saw the water receding, going out. And you can see all the bottom. It just keep on going, keep on going on, going on. Then we saw a wave building up and this wave going toward that other wave and coming in and going. They formed, not like ordinary wave, they had a small little wave, just like a small wave pile up on each other, climb each other. And then they build up way, ooh! I was so scared so. . . .

JJ: Where were you standing then?

TI: Right on the beach side, I was standing and watching. Then ooh, that must be tidal wave. So I said to him, "Tidal wave!"

And my co-worker said, "Tidal wave! Tidal wave!"

And that person who was living there, she came out and said, "What all this commotion?"

We said, "Oh, tidal wave." And that wave was just coming in already. Oh, it was high. I don't know how many feet but this was pretty high. Then she just jump in her car and she drove off because their driveway is pretty far, maybe from here to—let me see. Maybe—now let me see.

JJ: How many feet do you think?

TI: How many—about a hundred yards I think. You know the driveway. And then they hit the main

road. Then she drove—we was watching her. Then I saw one of the fisherman trying to tie his motorboat. You know the engine, that boat engine was tied to that. Then the wave hit him. Ho, I saw him rolling over.

I said, “Wow, this is bad.” With that strength that wave had, might as well run. That’s the only thing that came in my mind. At the same time when we saw—on the side, I saw the building structure just rise up and just crumble up. All this—just like you crumbled a matchbox, is all crumbled up. So I said, “Ha, move your feet, run.” Then this wave just coming right after you. Then we came to this barbed wire fence, (Kahului Naval Base). So, not supposed to run in there. Then what I saw, when I ran to there and I climb up, I saw a man stuck on the fence. He want to go through there. So I just went right nearby and just grabbed (one wire and pull up. Then) I put my foot right on that, you know where the wire, I put my foot right there. Then push him; he went right in. And then I went through that narrow (wire space). Until today, I wonder how I got through there. And then right in there, they had a sand dune. So I climb up and watch. Oh, that wave just came (rolling in), just to the side, it just collide (with the other wave).

Then, ho, this is really bad kind. Never did see those things in my life. And then the noise, the roaring noise. Then, all of a sudden, it start getting kind of quiet. Then it [receded]. When it [receded], the fishes I saw there. Ho, I never did see. Oh, all kind of fishes. But that was nothing. Life was more important so I said, “Just keep on going.”

JJ: So you were inside of the (naval) air force base.

TI: Mm hmm. Then as soon as the water [receded], I came out from there. And then we walked toward the main road, on this Hāna Highway. On the side, they had a pasture and that’s where the plantation keep all their horses. Nobody was there, I guess. Then another wave came. The big roaring noise and then those horses were covered up to their stomach. But they ran in the wave, moving all that. . . . Then, it start (coming toward the), almost to that main Hāna Highway. Oh, it was terrible.

JJ: Where were you at that—were you on the Hāna Highway when that wave . . .

TI: I was there on the Hāna Highway already so I’m not—want to stay around there anymore. I was so scared. Then I call the company office at Camp 1. This houses—I saw houses that built—really nice house, one of the walls way about four or five hundred yards away and the roof on one side. I thought, oh, good night. All those houses. I think every houses around the beach side had a damage. So we call for help. Ooh, Camp 1, all those houses I think, is—they have a big damage. They have a tidal wave and those people say, “Aw, don’t kid us. This tidal wave, it’s April Fool[s] Day]. No, no, no. You cannot fool us. It’s April Fool[s] Day.”

Then I guess they heard from the radio or something, I don’t know what they heard, but they said, “Get tidal wave. We have to . . .” Then they came for help.

JJ: So where was your truck in the meantime?

TI: Our truck got caught in the tidal wave and they cannot start—it’s in the water. That water was so high, oh. Here the road, and the truck was there but—right up.

JJ: It went right over the truck.

- TI: Never mind the truck. The truck can stay there. You have to run. Boy, that was terrible.
- JJ: How long was it, do you think, from the first [wave] to the second one?
- TI: Well, they had the—while I was so scared but maybe they had the—I don't know. Maybe forty-five minute or one hour or what but I know had so many wave came in but I'm not sure how many came in, but I know the first one and the last one. And that was all over one hour already. Boy, those buildings like that.
- JJ: What did they look like? Can you describe, kind of draw a picture?
- TI: Those buildings, you see, the wall is here, one side of the wall. And the roof is way, maybe another two or three hundred yards away. And all in pieces. But some of them were lucky. Maybe they were located—higher location I guess so the water just catch on certain parts of the building then destroyed that part. But aside of that, it was just bad. And that roaring sound bothered me about a month. Oh, even I sleeping, I can hear that roar, you know. It sure did bother.
- JJ: Was that just when the wave went in or did it make this sound when the wave went out also?
- TI: Just when the wave start coming in and then all those bushes, you know, they have all that bushes growing. And then you can hear that snapping, all the water just—then roar. That's why . . .
- JJ: Very loud?
- TI: Oh, yes, oh. Like once before they had that bad—what do you call that high wave warning, and then you hear that? Compared to that, it's nothing. Oh, it was terrible.
- JJ: Wow. So did you see any other people trying to run from the wave?
- TI: No, I think most people were working so they were not home, not morning time, about seven something, I guess it started. So most of the people were working, I think. So no, I didn't even hear that. They had some people lost their life or something like that in that Camp 1 area. Other area, I don't know, but in that Camp 1 area, I didn't hear that. So that was really fortunate. Of course they lost their house and everything but (they survived).
- (This is in Kahului Maui.) I know after the tidal wave, that was the next day, I think we just drove around in the car and they had that—what call that eighteen services right near the breakwater. But on this side, I think they still have a wall or something, they had a big eighteen service this navy people had. On this area, they had those amphibious kind. Oh, the wave just twist 'em around everything. Oh, it was a mess. But this side, look like the wave came this way. The place where I was working, came toward the shore from outside, I think. But one thing that I think is funny is maybe it's the depth of the ocean or what, but some place is higher than the other location. The damage worse in some area so maybe it's the bottom of the ocean that protect that or I don't know.
- JJ: So when you went around the next day and looked, was your house damaged?
- TI: No, my house is way so many miles away from the beach, so.
- JJ: What did you do right after it was over? You said you remembered the last wave. How did you know it was the last one?

- TI: Because we were there yet. Down there. But we were on the Hāna Highway so that was pretty safe. But we didn't hear any wave sound so must be that was the last but that was—I don't know how many hours, I cannot remember that.
- JJ: How old were you?
- TI: Hmm, let me see. I think thirty-something. I got married thirty-four years old, someplace around there I guess. But those days are your prime so you can run, everything. Lucky, I could run. Otherwise (chuckles) I'd be a dead person.
- JJ: What did you do the rest of that day?
- TI: Oh, I don't know. I cannot remember what I did. But I know I went back to our shop and stayed there, I think. I don't know, I'm not sure.
- JJ: Then tell me about the cleanup after that. Did you clean up?
- TI: Clean up? Oh, they sent a special people to clean all that up. And of course, most of the buildings afterward we went there had some kind of damage. Some lost the house entirely. Or some part of the house building is. . . . And all around the palm trees, there's coconut trees, when the water [recede] like that, they dug a hole right on the palm (tree's side). And then they had all the dead fishes there. The fishes they all dead because they cannot go out. And then right by that palm tree, that coconut tree, was just like a pond. So the fishes all stayed and then they died.
- JJ: So there were lots of dead fish around?
- TI: Mm hmm.
- JJ: What did it smell like? Did they . . .
- TI: Was terrible. Of course, even you working like that, you kind of worried because might have another one, you think. That's all in your mind so working around the beach side was not that. . . . Although some people were—they didn't see those things, they never experienced it. They think nothing about it but when go through all that or. . . . So in (1946) something, I told you anybody that—friends or anything—I said, "When they tell you tidal wave, don't go near the beach. Always stay the high spot and watch. If you want to watch the wave, you stay high spot and watch because after all, that wave has the strength and they keep on rising until God knows where. So don't go near the beach, just keep away from. . . ." But I think that (1946) [tsunami], that beach, the water just rising, it filled up I think. So of course, this building that's low, well, the water came in but those high ones I think was all safe. Because by the Camp 1 tidal wave was the type that we just spin around. And they had a force like this rising. Just like a river, yeah, but that Camp 1 was just—the water was churning. That was bad.
- JJ: How did you feel about going fishing after that?
- TI: Well, for a long time, I didn't even go. Anyway, on the shoreline, never had fish, too, because most of the fish came on the shore and they died.
- JJ: Oh, so there weren't very many fish.
- TI: No, not many fish, too. They have that reef, and all that was broken, too. The reef is broken and

the fish couldn't hide, too. So never had too much fish other than the fish you could. . . .

JJ: So you didn't go fishing for a while?

TI: So many years I just—then I start going again. Until then, no.

JJ: What do you think—were there a lot of changes in the community after that?

TI: Changes, let me see. No. Of course some of the people that had house on the beach side, they move out. But still people build a house and move in so I think not much changes.

JJ: How would you compare life before and after the tidal wave?

TI: Well, those people that were caught in that tidal wave, well, maybe they had. . . . But like I was—I was just only—just like a spectator so it didn't affect me. But during the night, with that ocean roaring like that, it was bad for me. But working here and there and doing that, well it just went back to normal.

JJ: Well, thank you very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

TI: No, I don't think so because many things I think I cannot remember maybe. I think that's about all that covers. I think the most important thing is you describe the way how you, you know? Yes, it's just like a mountain with small waves.

JJ: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

**TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY:
Oral Histories**

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